To restore political and social life in Syria

An interview with Yassin al-Haj Saleh

D. L. Jacobs

On February 2 and March 4, 2025, Platypus Affiliated Society member D. L. Jacobs interviewed Yassin al-Haj Saleh, a Syrian writer and dissident who participated in the Syrian Revolution and the Arab Spring. Saleh was imprisoned from 1980 to 96 for his membership in the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau).[1] *Saleh is the author of* The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy *(2017)*[2] *and other books. An edited transcript follows.*

D. L. Jacobs: How did you become involved in Leftist politics?

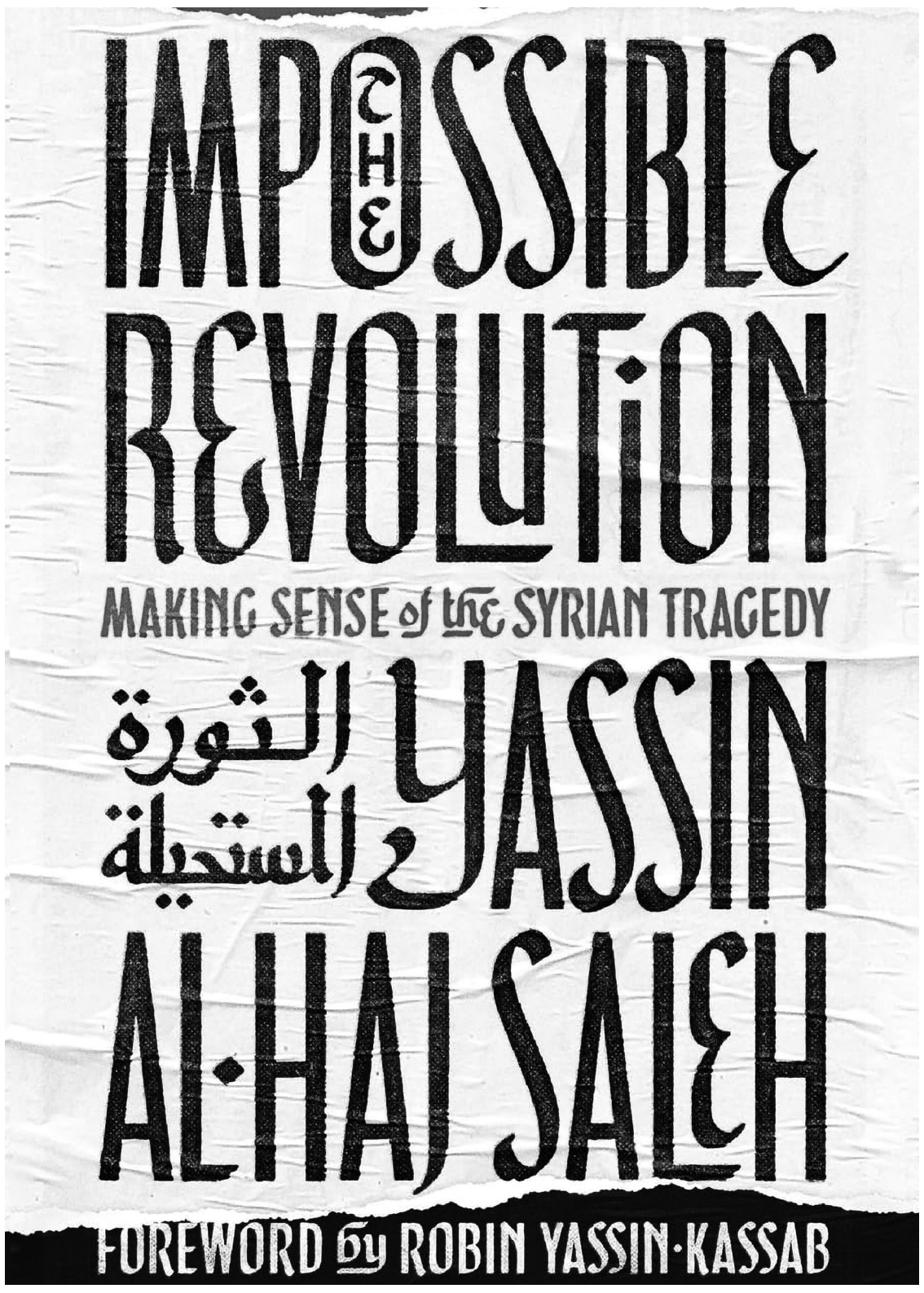
Yassin al-Haj Saleh: It was in the atmosphere in Syria in the 1970s, even in a small, boring town like Raqqa. Actually, Syria at that time was still productive to political thought and organization: Arab nationalism, Ba'athism, Nasserism,[3] communism. At that time, the Islamists were not very visible; it was still, what we called in Arabic, a progressive tide.

At that time I was a child — 11–12 years old — I would hear from my elder brothers about the heated debates related to the split in the Syrian Communist Party. Up to 1972, we had one Syrian Communist Party. In April 1972, there was a split between the group that I would join later — Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) (SCP (PB)) — and the official one recognized by the Soviet Union and who would ally itself with the Hafez al-Assad regime, which had been in power for less than a year and a half. The main issue of the split was autonomy of the Communists from the Soviet center. It was a few years after our humiliating defeat in 1967, Israel had occupied the Golan Heights in Syria, the Sinai Peninsula, and what remains of Palestine, Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. It was humiliating and shocking to intellectuals, to almost everybody — even the Communists. It led to the split because the Soviet Union thought of this war and this national catastrophe from the lens of the Cold War and the Soviet Union's world interests. This wasn't acceptable to many people in Syria, and it led to the split of the Syrian Communist Party. There was this atmosphere of debates with Khalid Bakdash, who was the historical leader of the Party and its general secretary since 1933 — for 39 years. He died in 1995 and was general secretary for almost 56 years. After he died, his wife Wisal Bakdash inherited his post, and after she died, their son Ammar became the general secretary. This gives you a sense of the old, bureaucratic, uncreative way of doing things. The other group at that time, the SCP (PB), was led by Riad al-Turk — he died on the first day of 2024 at the age of 93. They focused on autonomy and they were, in a way, nationalists, which at that time referred to Arab nationalism rather than Syrian nationalism: autonomy, Arab unity, Arab solidarity against imperialism, against colonialism, and for the liberation of Palestine from Zionist colonialism. This isn't well understood and appreciated in the West because nationalism means something else: chauvinism, war, aggression, colonialism. In the Third World, it's not always like this. Even there, it can be dangerous and oppressive, but at that time it had something emancipatory, something anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist. When the Party split in 1972, it was about opposition to Hafez — the regime did not exist at the time. It became so, especially after the Syrian intervention in Lebanon in 76.

It was against the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Lebanese nationalist progressive movement.[4] Here the SCP (PB), which I would join in 1977, became more opposed to the Assad regime. I tried to read some of Lenin's books without understanding anything. They referred to experiences alien to me, and I felt uncovered, exposed. At the least I knew the titles of many of Lenin's books. I knew the names of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Leonid Brezhnev, and Ho Chi Minh. I read Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (1906). I developed a global perspective without knowing any of the details.

DLJ: You have mentioned that you had a change in your political and theoretical thought. How did that happen? Did you feel that Marxism was dogmatic?

YAS: No, this came much later. In jail, paradoxically, I became a Marxist. I was a communist before, like I guess many people in the Arab world, in the Third World, but without reading much. I was arrested in 1980; I was almost 20, a medical student, and so I had already read a few things: the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), and parts of *The Germany Ideology* (1846).



Cover of *The Impossible Revolution*

For the first year and a half in jail we didn't have books, and the conditions were very bad, but then they improved. I would read Marx. At that time — you're too young to know this — but in whatever you would read, you bumped into Marx and his ideas. In newspapers and magazines and books, especially those translated from French to Arabic — in Syria and Lebanon, most of the books at that time were translated from French — Marx was the big figure.

Lévi-Strauss would tell you about Marx; so would Foucault, Bourdieu, almost everybody in the first half of the 1980s. What had a remaining effect on me was reading some dissident literature by Arab

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines
Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society
The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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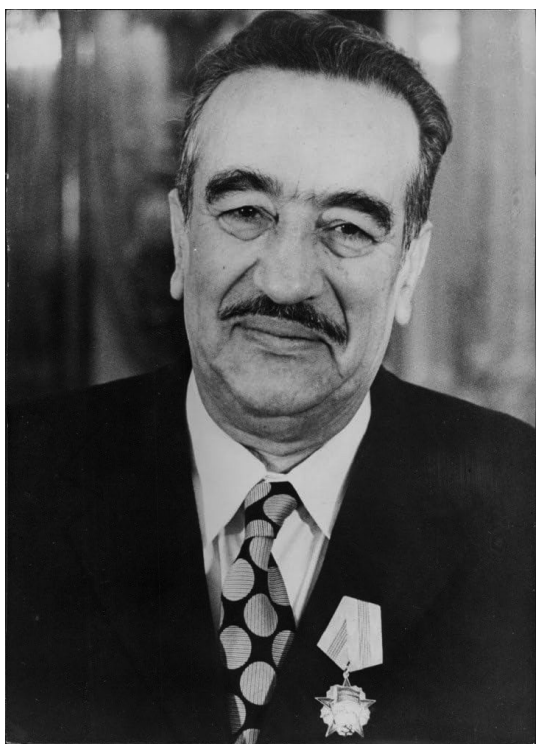

Khalid Bakdash, founder of the Syrian Communist Party

American orbit a few years later, and Egyptian society, which was already denied organization and political mobilization, couldn't oppose this.

Assad was the same, but in a different way. He crushed the backbone of Syrian society and intervened in Lebanon, gathering cards for Syria as a "regional power." This regional role allowed non-state actors — the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Kurdish and Shia groups in Iraq, Palestinian groups — to support the regime. Not only did the Assad regime incite civil war in Syria, it cooperated with parties in the civil wars of neighboring countries.

There was a convergence between a humiliating national defeat (1967) and a brutal dictatorship. Even before that there was a dictatorship, a one-party system with some adornment — parties that were auxiliaries to the regime, one of which was communist. And in the late 1980s, it became two. There was another split and both of them supported the regime. The groups committed suicide through this, and those who didn't were put in jail. In those days, the Syrian economy was… we're talking about the Third World, about rampant corruption in the days of Hafez al-Assad: bribery to his bureaucracy, military, and security forces. All these combined in a way that lacked any self-cohesion besides the effect of sectarianism; he sectarianized the military and security apparatuses. Hafez al-Assad realized that it wasn't too hard to seize power in Syria, but the difficulty was in keeping it. You could say that the history of the Assad family rule is the history of the ascendance of a predatory class from those who owned power, the sons of the high officials. One son was usually in the military, the others in business. They were the third Ba'athist generation. The first was the founding figures: Michel Aflaq, Salah al-Din al-Bitar, et al. After them came the military men that seized power. Then, starting from the 1990s, their sons had their own businesses from the money that their parents seized through corruption like properties, etc. This is the class that pushed to neoliberalize the Syrian economy in 05. They are the generation of Bashar al-Assad.

DLJ: What was the Syrian Communist Party doing in terms of civil society? Were they organizing people? What did they do outside of the political sphere?

YAS: The members within the regime were just adornments. They showed up, got cars, and lived in middle-class or well-off neighborhoods. They adapted with the regime and gained wealth — less wealth, of course, than the main officials of the regime. They were part of the middle class and they lacked any independent will to change or criticize anything. Their membership grew old along with their perspectives and ideas. The same thing happened to the other parties. Our communities were also destroyed. At least we tried to do something on the level of culture: novels, essays, books, etc. One phenomenon of Syrian political life was that the smartest and the most dynamic individuals left the parties — the same everywhere in the world.

DLJ: The rise of the one-party state and the Assad regime was concomitant with the destruction of civil society. You said there was growing poverty, but it's not like there were conditions by which people had an opportunity to organize civil life, let alone organize socialism.

YAS: Syrian society was de-civilized. In Arabic, I use a word that translates to "lumpenization." Syrian society became degraded, shabby, and shapeless. People were living in their own narrow circles of family, local community, minority group, etc. In a way, the whole Syrian society was turned into minorities. There was no majority, as majority is a matter of civil society, democracy, political life, elections. Of course there are some demographic majorities, but without any political translation. For example, the country's Arab majority: Sunni Muslims are the majority, but without any political translation. Additionally, people feared that informants would report them to the security apparatus. The problem we are facing is not that we don't have a state or political parties; we don't have a society. We have communities with bitter memories of the last 50–60 years.

DLJ: You mentioned the fear of being reported. In your book you describe the development of absolute Arabism, which seems to have conditioned Syrian society, even today.

YAS: I talked about absolute Arabism in the context of trying to explain the roots of Syrian fascism. I wrote an article on it in 2012, because I was shocked by the level of violence that the regime used against Syrian society and I tried to find the intellectual and social origins of this.[12] I called it absolute Arabism, a paranoiac, post-colonial imagery or self-perception. Syrians were perceived as solely Arabs, which is 85% of the population. Still, absolute Arabism didn't refer to this fact but essentialized the country. It Arabized the Arabs themselves. You cannot be Arab unless you are an Arab nationalist. And you cannot even be an Arab nationalist without being Ba'athist. With absolute Arabism, you have to share a certain set of ideas and be loyal to the mass party. Instead of unifying the population, it became a divisive power and weakened society. It legitimized violence against others as not being real Arabs. Sure, the Kurds were marginalized and ethnocided, but most of the victims were Arab, either because they were Islamists or independent communists, etc. It wasn't solely against non-Arabs; it was a strategy for control, politicide, and fascism. The second root of Syrian fascism is related to sectarianism, and the third aspect is related to class: the sort of modernism favorable to cities rather than rural areas.

DLJ: In another essay of your book, you write about the change in flags.[13]

YAS: I'm happy that you raised this and that I wrote it. I was in Douma when I wrote it, and it relates to my personal experience at that time. Walking in Douma, after two years of living underground in Damascus, where the image of Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad was omnipresent, but not in Douma at the time.

The Syrian flag became visible only after the revolution in the context of opposing what later came to be represented by the revolution flag. The pre-revolutionary Syrian flag has three horizontal stripes: red, white with two green stars, black. The revolutionary flag is Syria's flag of independence: a green horizontal stripe instead of red, a white stripe but with three red stars, and then a black one again. On the other hand, the Salafists and Daesh[14] had their banners, e.g., a white inscription on a black background or vice versa.

There were the hardcore regime-ists who were raising the image of Bashar and Hafez al-Assad. Secondly, there were the moderates of the regime who identified with the official red flag. Third, are the Salafists and Salafi Jihadists. The fourth are the non-Salafist, the non-extremist revolutionaries, i.e., the Free Syrian Army and the activists like us, who identify with the revolutionary flag. I thought that this flag would be an opportunity to create a common ground for Syria's civil society to overcome two forms of extremism: those who identify with the images of Bashar and Hafez al-Assad, and the Salafists.

The revolutionary flag is pre-Ba'athist. It was there since the days of the French mandate and the days of independence. The regime ideologues and the propagandists would say this is the colonial flag, but this isn't true. As for the banners, mostly rural, middle, and lower-middle classes identified with them. But there was a dynamic due to impoverishment in this sector.

These groups — Daesh, Jaish al-Islam,[15] or even Jabhat al-Nusra and the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham,[16] their elite group — they have some kind of internationalist vision. That's why I called them "conquered imperialists" in a book published in 2019. They want to conquer the world, but they are so weak and they're continually crushed by the conquering imperialists.

DLJ: The essay raises classic questions about revolution. It's interesting that the pre-Ba'athist flag came out. You've written about the task of overcoming both the regime and the conquered imperialist. What can people learn from your experience? What was the attempt to prevent violence and social disintegration?

YAS: For a long time, many of us thought of ourselves as pro-democracy revolutionaries, and we felt that we had lost the battle. It was depressing. The victors were the regime, supported by staunch allies: the Iranians, Russians, and their satellites. They were not opposed by other superpowers, whether regional or international: the U.S., Israel, Iran, or even Turkey. The Turks weren't happy, but they eventually came around to normalizing it. You might remember that president Erdoğan said repeatedly that he wanted to meet and reconcile with Assad.

So, when Assad's regime fell, I don't think it was a continuation of what started in 2011. Many people now say the revolution has won, or that we won the battle, but this should be understood in a more nuanced way. In a sense, we lost the revolution. Then something happened, and the regime fell because it had no cause, no meaning. It was extremely corrupt, and it lacked any will to defend itself.

DLJ: You've written that there was a period in the revolution that was focused on fighting both the regime and extreme Islamism.

YAS: Between 2013 and up to just weeks before the Assad regime fell (2024), it became a highly sectarianized struggle; in a way it was a Sunni–Shia struggle. The Sunnis, who are the majority among Syrians, became, as I've described, "Arabized Arabs." You could also say Sunnis underwent a "Sunnification": they became, in a sense, "double Sunnis," or Islamists. Islamism is not about Islam or simply being a Muslim. Islamism is not just a translation of the fact that you are a Muslim. Islamism is a political ideology derived from Islam — whether Sunni, Shia, or other — and it is connected to modernity, to the nation-state, to living in the 20th and 21st centuries. The Sunnification of Sunnis came with sectarianism. The standard idea before was that sectarianism was mainly a matter for minorities. But we saw that Sunnis were turning themselves into a kind of minority, with a narrow, extremist ideology. Islamists were and are a minority among Sunni Muslims, but this minority is active and vocal, and monopolized the interpretation of Islam. Meanwhile, the majority was silent or confused.

Our defeat came about not only because the regime won the battle. It was also because of this unhealthy, even cancerous, growth within the body of the revolution. We had a brutal regime that discriminated against people, used barrel bombs, chemical massacres, rape, and torture. This led to extremism: those who were victims developed unhealthy tendencies toward extremism, which weakened them further. That's why I insist that this is not a continuous course of a revolution that emerged out of its victories. Maybe we need many years to fully understand, explain, represent, and tell what really happened. Many of the difficulties Syria is facing now are related to the monstrous path that the Islamists took.

When we talk about Islamists, we're talking about many groups. At times, they fought each other. They are, in a way, post-monstrous. But this shouldn't be understood to mean that they are now completely humanized. There is an inertia preventing them from moving forward. Islamists carry the burden of history on their backs. Whether they chose this or not, it is a big obstacle. Some of them are still there. Some of them might want to move forward, but can't because they were part of it; they simply cannot change overnight. They are aware of the problems, but they lack courage. They don't have a paradigm. But it's a matter of paradigm, which is necessary for moving forward, even if you lose some faith in it.

DLJ: In 2011–13, what was the relationship between the group that identified with the revolutionary flag (green-white-black) and the different Islamist groups, including the moderate ones?

YAS: It's not that there were extremist Islamists and moderates living side-by-side as fixed categories from the beginning. No. "Moderate" and "extremist" are dynamic outcomes of radicalization, moderation, extremization, militarization, and sectarianization. Many people became extremists because of this dynamic of extremization, which I try to explain in my essay "The Rise of Militant Nihilism."[17]

There were processes that led to violence, brutality, destruction, the weakness of the opposition, their poor performance, and the inaction or the complex position of the international community. This led to extremization, but it took almost two years. Even before the revolution, we had some Salafis, but they weren't a big force. However, everything was favorable to their growth, and they had help from Salafi networks in the Gulf states — financial help, media support, etc. People like us, of course, wouldn't get funds — even if we accepted, even if we wanted funding.

In the first two years, there were spaces of convergence between people like us and some believers, and even some Islamists. The Syrian National Council, established in October 2011 (seven months after the revolution), was headed by Burhan Ghalioun. When we talk about Islamists before the revolution, we mostly meant the Muslim Brotherhood, who can be problematic on many issues, but they are not Salafis. The Salafis believe that we should live according to the principles and rules that the Salaf (our ancestors) followed in the first century of Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood was formed in the 20th century. Salafists came about even later, but they are more reactionary.

There were secularists and the Muslim Brotherhood. At that time there was no real Free Syrian Army representation yet, but they would join. Local coordinating communities were represented in the National Council. This reflects the fact that there were no rigid barriers separating secularists, Islamists, or conservative people. There was a common cause: change — political change and democracy. We were aware that Islamists interpreted democracy differently. For them, it was more of a procedural thing. There was a consensus to sideline this difference for the time being. Then, because of the intervention of big regional and international powers, before the end of 2012, they imposed the formation of the Coalition of the Powers of the Syrian Revolution. This was far less Syrian than the National Council, which was ours. I was not a member of it — I was doing my work as a writer. The Council was genuinely Syrian — even if I was critical of it for its poor performance: they weren't dynamic; they were all living abroad.

DLJ: What are the most important things that could help right now in politics or society? What are the urgent issues for Syria today?

YAS: I've been worrying the last few days because of the narrow formation and thought basis of the group ruling the country now. There are growing international and regional pressures, especially from the most colonial and racist force — Israel. Just a few days ago, Netanyahu threatened that Syrian forces would not be allowed to spread west of Damascus, nor into the governorates of Quneitra and As-Suwayda. He also said that Israel would not tolerate any actions concerning the Druze. This is just a pretext because the Syrian Druze are Syrians, and many of them have said it themselves. But this attitude is colonial and thuggish. These two factors — especially Israel, but also the fact that the Americans are still controlling the northeastern part of the country through the PYD[18] — are worrying. Things seemed positive three weeks ago, but now they no longer look positive. There is something hidden, and we don't know what's happening. You feel that the team leading the country now is less optimistic, less self-confident.

The economy is still very bad, with no signs of revival. The longer this continues, the worse the effects on the country will be. The best thing would be if the leadership could navigate these challenges in a way that enlarges the basis of their politics, to politicize more people, and avoids monopolizing power. It is the right thing to monopolize armies, but it doesn't work to do it in a sectarian way — to "Sunnify" it. It didn't work in the days of Hafez al-Assad — not only because Alawites were a minority (about 12% of the population), but because it was never about the nation or the homeland; it was about a community, whether big or small. I'm afraid that because they liberated the country, they will try to "Sunnify" the army to a large degree and monopolize power. It will appear as a new sectarian rule, using the army to stay in power forever — as they used to say in earlier times. I'm also afraid of inertia. Some of them are good-intentioned, even smart, but that's not enough. You need a vision, plan, strategy. You need to convince people of your legitimacy and of the public content of this vision.

DLJ: In your account, the Syrian Revolution started to suffer from inertia in the 2011–13 period. This inertia allowed for all sorts of things that ultimately derailed the revolution. Were there visions in the streets of Damascus and other places you visited at the time that you feel were not taken up? Are there still visions there that could be revived?

YAS: Yes. When I spent time in the country, people were very positive. They saw themselves as a continuation of the revolution, which is good from a political point of view, though you may disagree if you analyze the situation. The inertia I'm referring to is that of the Islamists. They carry a heavy history and cannot move forward freely with their Salafi-jihadi baggage. Syria cannot be ruled by the political expression of a single community, even if it is a majority. Sunnis in Syria are a demographic majority, but their social environments vary to the extent that this demographic fact becomes meaningless. They have never been unified. They are rural, urban, rich, poor, Bedouins, peasants, etc. Most of them speak Arabic and think of themselves as Arabs, but "Arab" is not an ethnicity — it's a language. To be Arab means that your mother tongue is Arabic.

Ethnically, who can really say where someone comes from? Because of the Muslim empire, people mixed with everyone everywhere. Among Arabs, you find everything from black to blond people. Sunnis are the majority among Arabs, whether in Syria or in the whole Arab world, but they cannot be a real new political subject. The Sunnis are still a minority — perhaps 20% of the country. This is the inertia — they have a powerful victimhood narrative. And it's true: Arab Sunni Muslims were discriminated against for more than half a century during the Assad era. This victimhood narrative, combined with the global Islamic movement — which has many variations, including Salafi jihadism — contributes to how a majority ended up minoritizing itself in this way, becoming extremist. Ahmad al-Sharaa and his team don't have an answer for this. |P

Transcribed by Salim A., Ethan Kaimana, and Cristian Martinez Vega

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[1] Known as the Syrian Democratic People's Party (Hizb Al-Sha'ab Al-Dimuqratiy Al-Suriy) since 2005; it formed in 1973 as a split — the Syrian Communist Party (Political Bureau) — from the Syrian Communist Party (al-Ḥizb aš-Šuyūʿī as-Sūrī) that had been founded in 1944, which was itself a split from the Syrian–Lebanese Communist Party (Al-Ḥizb al-shuyūʿī al-sūrī al-lubnānī), founded in 1924.

[2] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, *The Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, trans. Ibtihal Mahmood (London: C. Hurst, 2017) and (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

[3] After Gamal Abdel Nasser, one of the leaders of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, and Egypt's second president.

[4] The Front of National and Progressive Parties and Forces (Jabhat al-Ahzab wa al-Quwa al-Taqaddumiyya wa al-Wataniyya), also known as the Revisionist Front, was formed in 1969 as an alliance of political parties. It became the Lebanese National Movement (Al-Ḥarakat al-Waṭaniyya al-Lubnāniyya) in the 70s, and, led by Kamal Jumblatt, participated in the Lebanese Civil War.

[5] Michael Young, "Assad's Forgotten Man: A Reason interview with Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj Saleh," *Reason* (May 5, 2005), <https://reason.com/2005/05/05/assads-forgotten-man/>.

[6] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "Chomsky Is No Friend of the Syrian Revolution," *TRAFO* (November 29, 2022), <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/35060>.

[7] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "Chomsky's America-Centric Prism Distorts Reality," *New Lines* (March 15, 2022), <https://newlinesmag.com/review/chomskys-america-centric-prism-distorts-reality/>.

[8] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "The Liquid Imperialism That Engulfed Syria," *New Lines* (September 7, 2023), <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/the-liquid-imperialism-that-engulfed-syria/>.

[9] "A Declaration By Syrian Intellectuals: 'The Era Of Tyranny Is Over'" (February 1, 2025), <https://notgeorgesabra.wordpress.com/2025/02/01/After-assad-a-declaration-by-syrian-intellectuals/>.

[10] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "[The Nihilism of Excess Meaning among Islamists]," *Jadaliyya* (November 16, 2010), <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/23569>.

[11] Also known as the Al-Nusra Front; founded in 2012, it was a Sunni Islamist organization that fought against Ba'athist regime forces in the Syrian Civil War.

[12] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "The Roots of Syrian Fascism," in *The Impossible Revolution.*

[13] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "An Image, Two Flags, and a Banner: Douma, July 2013," in *The Impossible Revolution.*

[14] Also known as the Islamic State; it was a Salafi jihadist militant organization that temporarily held significant territory in Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s.

[15] Arabic for Army of Islam, formerly known as Liwa al-Islam (Brigade of Islam); it was a coalition of Islamist rebel units in the Syrian Civil War.

[16] A Sunni Islamist political organization and paramilitary group that was involved in the Syrian Civil War.

[17] Yassin al-Haj Saleh, "The Rise of Militant Nihilism," in *The Impossible Revolution*.

[18] Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party), a political party in northern Syria.

Reconciling revolution

An interview with Peter Dale Scott

M. P. Byrne

On January 3, 2025, Platypus Affiliated Society member M. P. Byrne interviewed Peter Dale Scott, a former Canadian diplomat, poet, and professor emeritus of English at the University of California Berkeley. His critical writings on deep politics have focused on the clandestine operations of the American state from Vietnam through the War on Terror. Scott's books include The War Conspiracy: The Secret Road to the Second Indochina War *(1972),* Deep Politics and the Death of JFK *(1993), and most recently* Reading the Dream: A Post-Secular History of Enmindment *(2024).*[1] *An edited transcript follows.*

M. P. Byrne: Throughout your work, you've expressed a deep faith in the importance and radicalism of the American Revolution, yet you've also spent your career chronicling the clandestine and criminal elements in the American state. What did the American Revolution mean to you and your cohort in your youth, and what does it mean today?

Peter Dale Scott: The final thing in *Reading the Dream*: we need to learn to reconcile the need to preserve the best of what we inherited with the urgent need to radically change it. I was reacting to what younger people were doing. They were obsessed with the need to change everything, and I wasn't. I started with radicalism, but I didn't want to change everything; I just wanted to stop the Vietnam War — a limited proposal. I began to realize that the war was a symptom of a bigger problem. But to me, it didn't mean Herbert Marcuse's perspective, whom some people wanted to kill. He came clandestinely to Berkeley in the 1970s and spoke to about 10 of us in a room. He was as extreme as you could get: he said, "our words are all corrupted by capitalism. We're going to have to start with new words."

I believed Marcuse's mind had deteriorated since *Eros and Civilization* (1955), which had an immense impact on me. That idea of a clean break with civilization is the epitome of what I think would be disastrous. The Soviet experiment failed because it didn't do what Vladimir Putin correctly did, which is to link to the existing faith of the Russian people. Lenin saw power in the street and grabbed it. It wasn't a revolution at all; it was a coup, and you can't get a lasting revolution out of a coup. The Chinese Revolution may have rejected traditional Chinese high culture at one point, but they were still connected to the popular culture, and they're going to stay. There is a momentum built into Western culture, which is just one aspect of global culture; there is really only one culture.

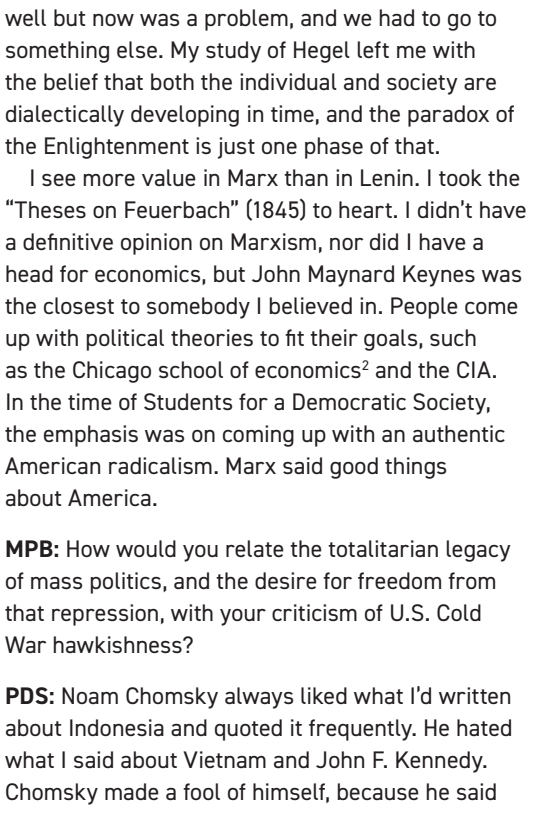
MPB: As someone who emphasizes an unaccountable deep state aiming to preserve entrenched financial networks, what kind of political project did you see yourself contributing to with this work, and how did it relate, or not, to Marxism?

PDS: I was influenced by the Frankfurt School. I taught a course with Leo Lowenthal, who was one of the last and the least known of the Frankfurt School. I thoroughly bought into the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Although I can't totally recall what I thought then, the book's idea seemed to be that the Enlightenment presents a paradox: it began well but now was a problem, and we had to go to something else. My study of Hegel left me with the belief that both the individual and society are dialectically developing in time, and the paradox of the Enlightenment is just one phase of that.

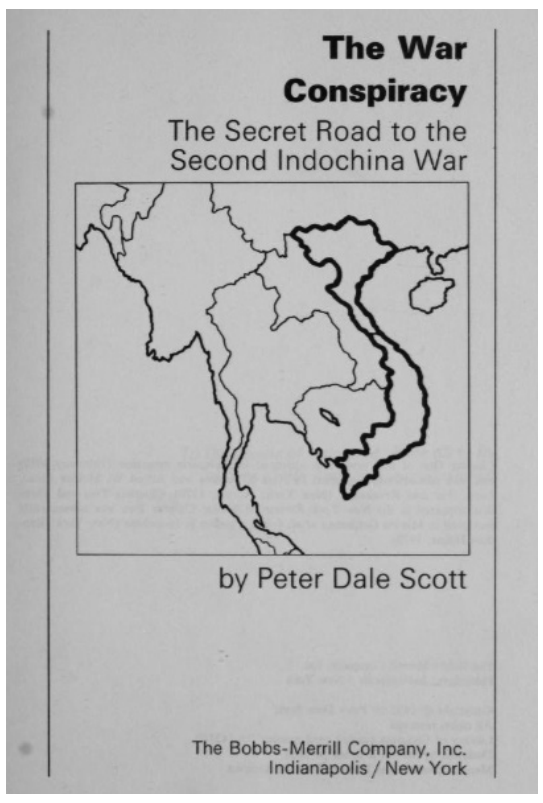
I see more value in Marx than in Lenin. I took the "Theses on Feuerbach" (1845) to heart. I didn't have a definitive opinion on Marxism, nor did I have a head for economics, but John Maynard Keynes was the closest to somebody I believed in. People come up with political theories to fit their goals, such as the Chicago school of economics[2] and the CIA. In the time of Students for a Democratic Society, the emphasis was on coming up with an authentic American radicalism. Marx said good things about America.

MPB: How would you relate the totalitarian legacy of mass politics, and the desire for freedom from that repression, with your criticism of U.S. Cold War hawkishness?

PDS: Noam Chomsky always liked what I'd written about Indonesia and quoted it frequently. He hated what I said about Vietnam and John F. Kennedy. Chomsky made a fool of himself, because he said there's no evidence that Kennedy would have



Cover of *Reading the Dream*



Title page of *The War Conspiracy*

pulled out of Vietnam, while there is a document that shows plans for it. But when the man from Czechoslovakia came to America, spoke to Congress, and thanked America for its role in helping to liberate Eastern Europe, Noam and Howard Zinn, in their wisdom, laughed at this man making a fool of himself by saying that. But they made fools of themselves.

America didn't do it selflessly. America was pursuing its own aims in liberating Eastern Europe and the CIA did give its support. I always concede that there was CIA support for Solidarność[3] — they bought them mimeograph machines, which by themselves can't create a movement. It was support for something that was authentic, autochthonous, coming out of the actual environment. Conservative peasants allied with radical workers, and they were cemented together by the group of intellectuals in between. I had someone ask Adam Michnik, the head of Solidarność, if Czesław Miłosz inspired them, and the answer came back: no — it was Simone Weil. Looking at the Polish situation in the 50s, Miłosz figured you needed somebody Catholic and radical, and so he translated Simone Weil into Polish. This is an example of how culture can be political. You and I are not going to affect politics. On the cultural level, you can prepare for political changes to occur as the product of other forces.

MPB: Has America drifted to the Left or the Right over the course of the 20th century?

PDS: Right and Left. American hard power has been a disaster, and it's become more unprincipled, ruthless, and murderous in its last days, because it's ending. The soft power has been good. A particularly important legacy of American soft power is something like Wikipedia, which is creating a global world opinion. This is what we need if we're going to get a global consciousness, a voice of the people that can constrain governments the way Solidarność constrained the Polish government. It has to happen on a global level.

MPB: One could say that the New Left had a successful cultural revolution. Yet today, we are faced with many of the same political problems. Why?

PDS: We have a lot of catching up to do. The Iraq War was such an obvious fiasco. The movement against the Iraq War didn't succeed. We've been waiting for something that will unite us again. Gaza is not that; the response is breaking people apart. You can have a pessimistic response, which usually means you don't do anything, or you can have an optimistic response. I'm trying to be optimistic about the election. I was rooting for Kamala Harris, just as if I'd been at a football game on election day, but the next morning, with a clear verdict for Trump, I was frankly relieved. If Kamala had won by a whisker, we would be dealing with immediate problems. Can we be optimistic? Yes, we can. Trump has said the day that he is president, he will end the suffering. That's not an idle threat, not a boast. He's the one person who could do that. And if he investigated the Deep State, that would be good.

MPB: What lessons do the political failures of radical politics in the 20th century hold for humanity? Is there a future for radical politics, for overcoming capitalism?

PDS: I don't speak for humanity. I speak for intellectuals who know a bit of history. Trump speaks for the people who don't know history, and I could never compete with Trump on that level. It's to the detriment of the Democratic Party that they were working so well on the intellectual level that they lost touch with their voters. It's not an accident that Trump is going to have been president twice. He was in touch with something in the country that the Democrats had lost contact with.

Any democracy always runs the risk of a big mouth, or as they say in France, "a man on a white horse." Democracy is in trouble everywhere. Neoliberalism has established the global polity of the present, it's not working, and Trumps are turning up all over the world.

MPB: How would you relate the economic interdependence forged with neoliberalism to your vision of a globally interconnected culture?

PDS: There are positive and negative aspects to globalism. The positive aspect is that the standard of living in the Third World is coming up, and the negative aspect is that the standard of living in America is declining. The correct position is for these things to happen in a measured way, so that the pain in America is eased, and the export of production to the Third World is slowed down to make it more supportable to everybody. This is all happening in an undisciplined and unregimented way, and I would like to see more power wielded by international bodies that worry about the health of the global ecumene where we're all living together. Unfortunately, the United Nations has been so abused by the great powers, first by America, when they gave the votes to the assembly to overturn the Security Council (1950), and then that turned back against America. America now loses the assembly where it used to win, and Russia and China tend to win. It really struck me that there was a vote recently in the third committee that was something like 100 to 8, which were America, Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand — all the Anglophone countries — plus two more. The Anglophone countries against the overwhelming majority in the UN. That means that the UN is no longer a vehicle that America would accept for ruling the world. The League of Nations pathetically lacked any enforcement. The UN set up an enforcement procedure, which was made a mockery by America. We need to get some kind of regulation of things, where you try to make things work by making sure that nobody is suffering too much. We're not doing a good job of that; people are suffering everywhere.

MPB: If the Russian Revolution was a coup, what were the American and French Revolutions?

PDS: It was a good thing that the American Revolution happened. John Adams pointedly said to Thomas Jefferson that the war wasn't the revolution; the war happened after the revolution had already taken place in the hearts of the American people. I quote that constantly, but I don't accept the necessity of having done it by war. In the short term, force can always deal with an immediate situation more than nonforce. But in the long run, it's the opposite.

In Adams and Jefferson — the fact that they could reconcile, given how they treated each other when they were politicians — we can see that America has the power to reconcile. There are aspects of America that are forgotten now: the Great Awakenings, which led to the end of slavery. America became a country where no archbishops or monsignors were in control. America is a free-for-all for religion, and that's been good for religion: it's produced bad religions, good religions, and saints, like Dorothy Day.

MPB: In a 1985 interview, you said that the Left does not understand the incidental element of things like the Kennedy assassination — that they have no room for anomalies. Could you elaborate on that?

PDS: I got into a fight with Howard Zinn. I wrote an essay to prove that Kennedy had been planning to withdraw from Vietnam. Howard phoned me and said, "Peter, you don't want to publish this essay; it's bad politics." I asked why, and he said, "You're implying that it made a difference who was the president." I said, "That's exactly the point I'm trying to make." And he said, "No, the whole system is wrong. Just changing a president doesn't change anything." The whole point of my essay was to prove that Kennedy was about to do something significant, which would have gotten us out of Vietnam.

Chomsky was abroad at the time. He came back and arranged for my essay to be in his book.[4] What I didn't know was that Noam was preparing to demolish my essay because he so strongly disagreed. He wrote a whole book — R*ethinking Camelot*, his worst book — to refute what I claimed.[5] I don't know anyone who thinks that was a good book. Dan Ellsberg had dozens of emails with Chomsky about all of this. We both felt that Noam was getting very precise about a historical detail in which he was dead wrong.

MPB: What is your disposition towards the French Revolution?

PDS: A revolution should preserve and advance. The French Revolution became very violent very quickly, and was particularly hard on the Catholic Church. It's going to become corrupted. The world we're in is radically corrupt. This is the theme of the Book of Genesis: everything we do is tainted. Every revolution, no matter how noble its beginnings, is going to become part of the world and worldly. It's sad to see what has happened to America, which has always been an oligarchy, and it's clear now. But there have been good oligarchs as well as bad oligarchs. We might say that the great presidents of the U.S. were Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy. What do they all have in common? They come out of the oligarchic class. Kennedy was *nouveau riche*, but the other two were from the established Roosevelt family. They moved America forward. The progressives and income tax did something to reduce the disparity in wealth and income that is the great plague of today, and that disparity was reduced right down to about 1980 — the Reagan Revolution. Reagan's formula, to scrap all the things that the government has been doing and liberate wealth to proliferate again, has been further compounded into increased inequality.

MPB: Is your work an appeal to a new New Deal?

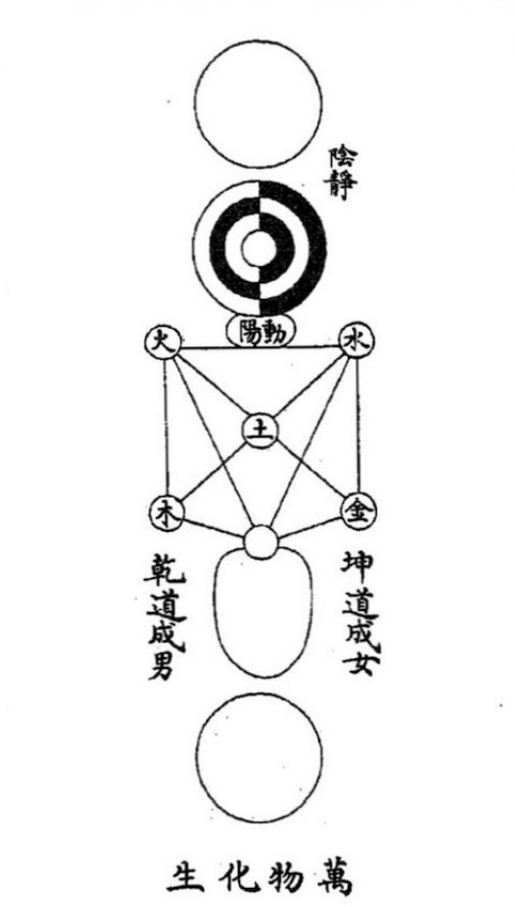
PDS: I talk about the future as a casino. Some things are known — the sun will rise again — but everything is speculative: you can bet, but you can't know. There's no science for betting. But what I can do is analyze what I think is wrong in the system as we now have it, and define the problems that need to be corrected. Ignorance holds us back. Some people exploit ignorance as a way to move forward. Trump wants to lie about things because he can get his agenda more easily if people don't know the facts. The elephant in the room is the one thing that doesn't get debated in Congress: the defense budget. When Trump was elected, he promised to increase the budget. They took a vastly increased defense budget that came from Trump and increased it more.

MPB: Doesn't the defense budget abet the development of American soft power as well?

PDS: I've been on the internet since about 1980 when it was initially confined to the Department of Defense and the defense industry at Stanford and the University of California. Nothing has done more to hasten the decline of nationalism and the creation of a global community than the internet.

MPB: Does the internet seem dystopic now?

PDS: Yes, it's used to manipulate us. That said, I couldn't do what I'm doing if it weren't for the internet. It's always a double helix. Here are two words I discovered a couple of weeks ago: polythetic and monothetic. Every event is polythetic, i.e., there are many factors going into it. The error of most thinkers is to come up with explanations that are monothetic, that have a single solution for everything. This dynamic destroys friendships, and it's about to destroy one of my deepest friendships: my friend has decided that Israel is the source of all the world's problems. Israel is a source of problems, but it's not the only source. Our problems are polythetic. My friend has come up with a solution for the problems that he sees as monothetic, and I just disagree. It's a polythetic world. For example, I was shocked at how Jeffrey Sachs explained Syria. He quoted from a UN report on Syria in 2009 and said, "everything is good here in Syria." And then suddenly everything goes bad. Sachs left something out. There was an extreme drought in Syria that started in 2006. Violence broke out as a result. If the violence broke out in 2009, wouldn't the drought be worth mentioning as one of the factors? Sachs doesn't mention it. It's a stridently monothetic analysis of the situation in Syria.



Zhou Dunyi's Taijitu (Diagram of the Utmost Extreme)

MPB: Is there a future for this concept of the Left, of moving towards utopia?

PDS: Left and Right are terms that came out of the French Revolution, which has run its course. There will be competing forces, but they'll be understood as secular versus post-secular. The title of my latest book is *Reading the Dream: A Post-Secular History of Enmindment*. There are two ways we can think: about facts, or we can think about ideals and dreams; Yin or Yang — those are the key words. We have two ways of thinking, and enmindment is when we think of both of them at the same time. Reading is a Yang activity using words. Dreaming is a Yin activity; it cannot be put into words. When we do them both simultaneously, we are approaching the closest we'll ever get to utopia.

MPB: Why do you talk about the Dark Ages as a time of great progress?

PDS: The fall of Rome is desirable; not a disaster for culture, but a blessing. We get the first steps towards universal education in the Dark Ages. Stephen Greenblatt said that the fall of the Empire was more serious to the destruction of culture than the eruption of Mount Vesuvius that destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum. Greenblatt is reciting the old Petrarchan idea that the Dark Ages were just a step back. But they weren't; they were a step forward, and it was an age of deep faith. |**P**

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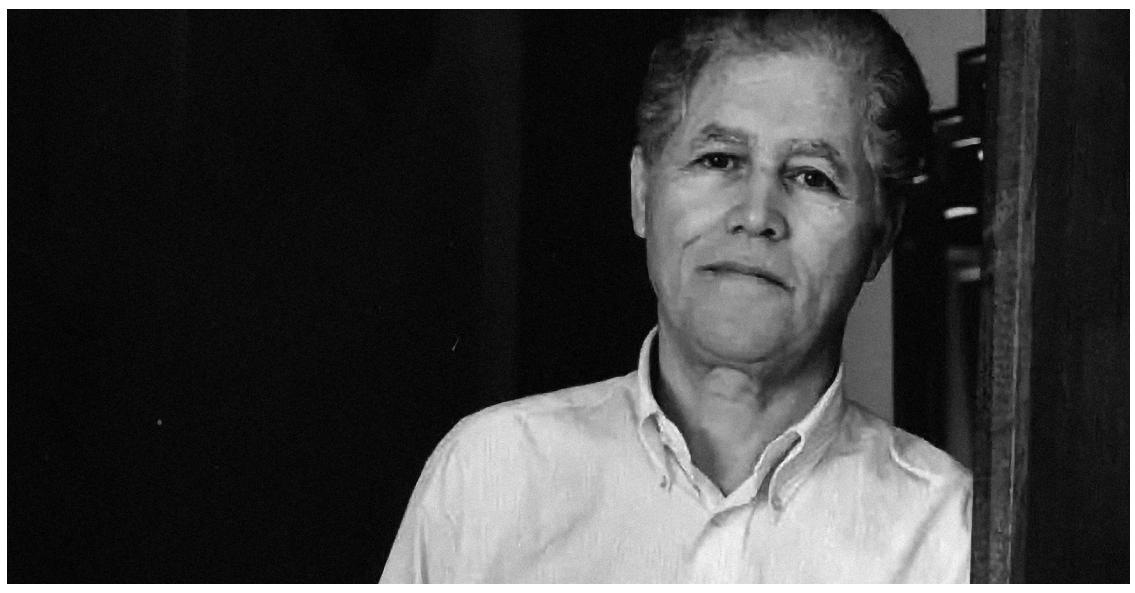
[1] Peter Dale Scott, *The War Conspiracy: The Secret Road to the Second Indochina War* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1972); Peter Dale Scott, *Deep Politics and the Death of JFK* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Peter Dale Scott, *Reading the Dream: A Post-Secular History of Enmindment* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024).

[2] A school of economic thought associated with the work of faculty at the University of Chicago, such as Milton Friedman and George Stigler.

[3] Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy „Solidarność" (Independent Self-Governing Trade Union "Solidarity"), a Polish trade union founded in 1980; it became a social movement in the 80s.

[4] Peter Dale Scott, "Vietnamization and the Drama of the Pentagon Papers," in *The Pentagon Papers*: *Critical Essays*, vol. 5, eds. Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 211–47.

[5] Noam Chomsky, *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War, and U.S. Political Culture* (Boston: South End Press, 1993).



Abdallah Laouri, Moroccan historian

authors, especially Yassin al-Hafez, who passed away very young. I read all his books. He was a Marxist and Arab nationalist at the same time, and he was critical of both Arab nationalism — because of its sentimentality and traditionality — and critical of what he called Sovietized Marxism, which he found uncritical and dogmatic. The other one is Ilyas Markos, from the same generation of Yassin Hafe. He passed away in 1992 or 93, also young. He was also a Marxist and Arab nationalist, and critical of both. The third is Abdallah Laroui, a Moroccan historian, and author of a widely read book at that time called *Contemporary Arab Ideology*. It was translated into Arabic but he wrote the book in French. In 1980 and before, I didn't understand much, to be honest. The fourth person, Burhan Ghalioun, was a young Syrian intellectual — he's now 80 — also from almost the same Marxist and Arab nationalist background. And he wrote a very good, small book called *Manifesto for Democracy* (1978) — a sort of a warm-hearted, populist pamphlet.

DLJ: What about Sadiq al-Azam?

YAS: I met him late, in 2001, during the so-called Damascus Spring. We were respectful acquaintances. He read my stuff and he liked it. Sadiq was politically silent up to 2000, after which he became critical of the regime. This was the area of convergence between a former political prisoner like me and a well-known thinker and philosopher like him.

DLJ: You were interviewed by *Reason* magazine in 2005.[5] Was there a socialist market economy after Hafiz al-Assad's reforms?

YAS: Not socialist, but a social market economy. Actually, it was liberalizing the Syrian economy according to the neoliberal formulas. Five years after Bashar came to inherit his father's post, he held a Ba'ath Party conference in Damascus. It was a few months after the forced withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, which had started in 1976. In 2005, after the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, there was a UN Security Council decision forcing Syria to end the occupation of Lebanon. They did, but they assassinated so many people and, with Hezbollah, they killed my friends, and many others, such as George Hawi, the former head of the Lebanese Communist Party. The liberalization of the Syrian economy was sort of the Beirut-ization of Damascus, bringing Beirut to Damascus with banks, new cars, and foreign agencies. We had our own Beirut after we were expelled from Beirut. Bashar was 40 by that time and his generation's moment became the age of business. First, their fathers were in power and they amassed huge wealth. Now the sons were in business. One of their sons would be in power as an officer, as a president, or a big officer in the army or in the security apparatus, and one or more in business. So the new liberalization of the Syrian economy came to reflect this change, that there's a new elite — a new subclass maybe, and they want a free market. The social market economy was the response to this emergent subclass.

DLJ: How was this a catalyst going into the 2011 Damascus Spring?

YAS: This neoliberalization of the Syrian economy benefited those closer to the center of power; those who were already rich and in the centers of the bigger cities rather than the suburbs and peripheries. Maybe 10–15% of the population benefitted while the rest deteriorated. By 2007, 37% of the Syrian population was under the poverty line of $2/day, according to the UN numbers. A few years before, in 2004, it was 31%. But at the center of Damascus, you find people are good: new cafés with elegant ladies and gentlemen. Before the reforms, most cars on the road in Damascus were 20–25 years old. In 2005–07, you would see cars of the same year.

There was a marginal new press that appeared. While this new press was close to the regime, it was something new in Syria. I never wrote in any Syrian outlet. Actually, my name and so many of us were unmentionable in the country, but we were able to express ourselves in Lebanese newspapers, and some of these were circulable in Syria. Because of the internet, many people were able to find our stuff published in non-Syrian outlets, even when some newspapers were outlawed.

DLJ: You've said there was a long period of political stagnation in the 1970s and 80s. What was that atmosphere like leading into March 2011?

YAS: There was a political coalition called the Damascus Declaration, with many of the weak opposition groups. The parties had become extremely weakened in the course of the 1980s and 90s. And there was a coalition of them with the Muslim Brotherhood who joined in 2005. But the Islamists left after a few months, and they allied themselves with Abdul Halim Saddam, who was the deputy of Bashar al-Assad, and who became a dissident in late 2005.

There was an official umbrella of the opposition that held a meeting in Damascus in late 2007, with about 170 people attending, and I was one of them. It was miraculous that the regime didn't know about it in advance. Anyway, they declared that they had the meeting, the Damascus Declaration, and elected so and so as a leading committee, etc. I don't remember. 10 of them were arrested. But, it was not as grand as it was in the 1980s, when all the members of any party would be arrested, tortured, and put in jail. The younger generation of activists was in their 20s or early 30s in 2011. This was the new element. They were the generation of the revolution, rather than my generation. I hope that our generation set a good example.

DLJ: I was living in Philadelphia when the Arab Spring broke out in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. It had a huge influence on people my age. Occupy Wall Street was directly influenced by the Arab Spring. You have written on the question of the Western Left's solidarity or non-solidarity with the Syrian Revolution. Obviously people wanted to identify with the uprising against Bashar al-Assad. But there are also Leftists who are anti-imperialist. You have an article about this.[6] Noam Chomsky would say that you're going to support U.S. imperialism if you support the uprising.

YAS: My friend Leila al-Shami is correct in saying that Palestine was betrayed by Western liberals and Syria was betrayed by Western Leftists. It is because of their America- or Eurocentrism. It's about autonomy again. For me, there is a continuity between rebelling against Soviet dependence, and dependence on the Western Left: they decide for us what's the right battle and when and against whom and who's the enemy. And while they are mistaken, they don't know anything. It's about themselves actually. What I find imperialist in the Western Left's anti-imperialist stance is that they tend to annex our struggle, Syrians, to their grand struggle against imperialism. I also don't see them doing anything — why do you want to annex our struggle? We resisted the Soviet Union and of course we resist you. Don't try to impose your views on us because, with all respect, we know our country, our region, far more than you. Please be respectful, be modest, and try to learn. And when you want to talk about Syria, be democratic, and ask some Syrians to express themselves and to speak for their country and themselves.

It's shocking that these basic things are ignored even by luminaries like Chomsky. I'm not talking about those who whitewashed the genocidal regime in Syria; they aren't worth it. Chomsky is an interesting case because reading his stuff explains why this is happening. He is the exemplary America-centrist thinker, that America is the evil God of the world and the only mover and shaker, and that the right thing is to be against America. As an American, it is understandable, but when he talks about Syria, he becomes stupid.

I quoted this in my article in *New Lines:* Chomsky was asked if the Russian intervention in Syria was legal.[7] So he said a sentence or two about it, then he said, "and what about America?" This is whataboutism. This is not the case, dear Noam. We are not talking about the U.S., which is evil enough in the Middle East and in Syria; there are other evil ones. Don't tell me that Obama, Trump, and Biden are the evil ones when Bashar Assad is bombing the people, running an industrial torture machine, and using chemical weapons. Chomsky is interesting because when you criticize him, you criticize in a way, the problem of the Western Left.

DLJ: Is this an ideological residue of the Cold War? Why has it persisted? Is it just bad thinking or education?

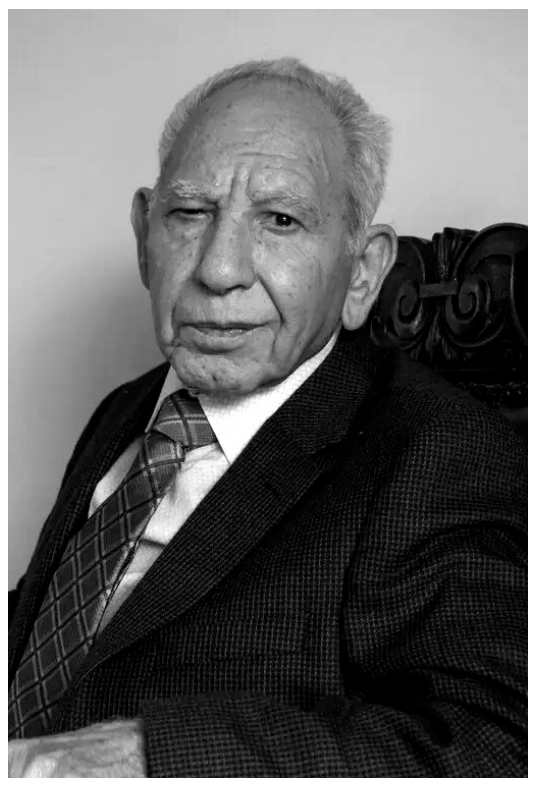
YAS: It's been 14 years since the Syrian uprising and Arab Spring started, and I'm shocked to have never heard one interesting idea put forward by American anti-imperialists. Why don't they have interesting ideas? Because they don't care. Maybe they could only think about the Syrian regime during the Cold War, when it was opposed to Israel and the U.S., but now American anti-imperialist analysis is reduced to high politics, which is the logic of colonialism and imperialism. Leftists should instead care about rights, social justice, representation of the masses, and organization of the poor people and the working classes. It's not about geopolitics. It's not about high politics. It is about the situation of the popular masses in the country. Can they protest? Can they organize? Can they express themselves? Can they negotiate as masses? Of course not. They were barrel bombed. Whom do I mean? Not the rich ones who lived in the center of cities or rich suburbs like Yafour or Saboura close to Damascus or the ones in Aleppo.

DLJ: You've used the phrase "liquid imperialism" to describe the moment, i.e., Syria has directly challenged all of the dogmas that the Left has because they want it to be good-vs.-bad thinking like Manichaeism.[8] Recently, Assad has taken flight. Could this be an opportunity for reflection on just how the Left has failed, even Syrians?

YAS: It's an opportunity for Syrian society to come to life. Syria, as a society, was dead. Now there is a new life. Of course, there are contradictions everywhere. The situation is liquid, without forms, without institutions. I was in Damascus for five weeks: the last few days of December and the whole of January. And to be honest, the activity of the Syrian or international Left is not a big issue right now, but rather how to restore a level of political and social life: how to organize, meet, and talk. Damascus and other cities are very active in this regard. We recently issued a declaration in Arabic, English, and French.[9] I participated in many meetings. People would gather and talk; you are invited to express yourself, and people tell their stories. I hope something solid will come out of it.

DLJ: Is there an opportunity for people to consider what happened in terms of the international Left? You seem to be saying that the Left tried to interject themselves with a political position in Syria in a way for which they really have no experience. Could this be an opportunity for people to reflect, even to say, "I don't know things; maybe I shouldn't politicize this"?

YAS: I hope so. Maybe they should feel that they were mistaken and they didn't understand. They were far from the emotions, feelings, and life of the Syrian people. Many Leftists were supportive of the genocidal regime — there is a genocidal element about the regime. It is open. I disagree if someone would say that what happened in Syria was not genocidal. The real battle for the people in Syria is to have the basics of political life, and they're doing it now, gathering in tens or hundreds in public spaces and talking about politics. And the Damascus Spring was this. Syrians who were 100% under the poverty line were denied the two basic rights of gathering and talking. To be a Leftist and to be a democrat now is to defend those rights.



Riad al-Turk, leader of the SCP (PB)

DLJ: Maybe this is an opportunity to return to the spirit of March 2011.

YAS: Exactly. In Syria, the path of the last 14 years has not been a straight line; it was a zigzag with catastrophes, with the collapse of the national setting of the struggle. Since late 2012 or early 13, it stopped being a Syrian struggle with the involvement of state and non-state actors from the region and from what I call liquid imperialism. You have Iran, Turkey, Israel, the U.S., Russia, and many sub-state actors from neighboring countries, which I call the conquered empires. There are narratives that portray the continuity of the present administration in Syria, that it is continuous from March 2011 to now. I don't think so. This is a big issue, and historians will work on it for many years.

DLJ: In your book you discuss how nihilism was brought on by internal factors, alongside the regime and the jihadists. This is related to the lack of political debate, alongside the external factors that helped to promote nihilism. How does this relate to the role that the Left has played ideologically in justifying things?

YAS: I've spent a lot of time working on this question. I have written two books about Islamism; I started talking about Islamic nihilism even before the Syrian Revolution. I published something on the religious in *Jadaliyya* in my last collaboration with them before the revolution,[10] but I also wrote about the rise of militant nihilism in May 2012. This was early on, when it wasn't clear that there was a Jabhat Al-Nusra.[11] We weren't sure if it was an invention of the regime or some other security apparatus.

This is structural. When you are denied these rights, you're forced under the poverty line. Nevertheless, there is one type of gathering that, no matter how oppressive a regime may be, cannot be disbanded: the gathering of believers in mosques, or churches for that matter. That is why religion came into this role, limiting political poverty. If this is true, and I believe that it is, the right thing to do contra Islamism is to have political life.

Marx said that religion is the soul of a soulless world. In my work, I have said that religion is the politics of societies that are prevented from having political life. The correct thing to do is to foster political life, to have democracy. This is what many secularists in our part of the world and the Western powers misunderstand; they insist that the right thing to do within these societies is to have a dictator, an oppressive clique, a regime or whatever, because these people have something wrong within their heads and their traditions. There is nothing wrong with them, at all. They become extremists in extreme conditions, and they become moderates when they have rights and are dealt with in a human way. The right thing to do is to have political life — at a minimum, rights, plurality, parties, debate, and political change from time to time. The Assad family ruled Syria for 53 years. Why do we have these extremists? Because there has been no political change, no horizon, no beginning, no promise. Religion is a promise for societies without promise.

There is another factor that is not so structural. The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan. The Americans, Saudis, Pakistanis, Egyptians, and Assad cooperated to weaken, defeat, and destroy the Soviet Union. Who encouraged the Islamists? It wasn't people in Afghanistan; the majority were from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, and from Syria after the defeat of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s. This is where Salafi jihadism was developed. The Jihadists, the "Arab Afghans," who returned to their homes, spread throughout many countries. After 9/11, and even more so after the American occupation of Iraq, the structural factor and this fomenting factor met. Then we had these nihilists: extremist and fascist Salafi jihadi groups in Iraq and Syria after the uprising. They prosper where countries are destroyed.

DLJ: This might seem paradoxical, but you also mentioned that the Islamists played on the isolation of the Syrian Revolution.

YAS: Yes. The Russo-American deal after the Ghouta chemical massacre (2013) was a gift to the Assad regime and these extremist groups. It was proof that they were right, that so-called international law and the international community didn't care about the fate of these people. After the regime killed 1,466 people in an hour, the Americans and the Russians made a sordid deal to take the chemical weapons away and exempt them from a breach of international law. Not only did we find barrel bombs and the remnants of the torture industry, we found that the regime kept its chemical weapons. This proved the extremists right. It showed that the international system was more extremist than the extremists themselves. But, of course, when you are powerful, you can't be an extremist; you are the measure of justice. The American administration constantly talks about moderation as if they are moderate. No, you are not moderate. In the Middle East, you have been extremely extremist, some of you even more so. And now we have Trump. Chomsky said something along the lines of the U.S. being an extremist power in the Middle East, and really at the global level.

I told you that I became a Marxist when I was in jail, and that these years were formative for me. I also stopped solely being a Marxist when I was in jail. I thought that I had developed this interest in intellectual life a bit more than political life, which had ended in Syria and seemed to have no prospect of coming back. Still, I had an interest in both, and I wanted to read and expand my knowledge, and not to confine myself to a particular ideology or thinker. Some people would call me a Marxist. I don't correct them, but I don't consider myself only a Marxist.

What happened after those long years in jail? First of all, we were politically defeated and our parties were destroyed. Second, our entire world was destroyed — the Soviet Union had collapsed. We were critical of the Soviet Union but still shared the socialist ideal, and this had collapsed. This impacted the Left everywhere, even the social democrats in the West. I thought it was vital for us to care about maintaining critical thought, and to broaden the basis of thought.

DLJ: You referenced Nasserism. What do you see as the legacy of Arab nationalism? This term was recaptured under the Assad regime; they said they were still carrying on this revolution. Western Leftists had this idea that the revolution was still ongoing with Assad, as though the regime were the last holdout of the revolution. This was true with Gaddafi as well.

YAS: It was defeated in 1967, not just because of its powerful enemies — the U.S., Israel, Western Europe — but also because it oppressed the popular masses. This was true in Egypt. Nasser was a young, Third World leader who wanted his country to move forward, but there was a contradiction between his aims and his methods. Arab nationalism was progressive in the 1950s, 60s, and maybe part of the 70s, but it is no longer progressive at all. It stuck to the old formulas — like your Western Left — of the leader and the party, but was not democratic in any way. The good thing about Arab nationalism was that it showed the region's people that they could win battles. At the same time, the nationalists themselves didn't completely own up to this. This was the battle of the people of the Arab world, not of "the Arabs." Syrians are not just Arabs. This shouldn't be restricted to ethnicity or nationality. We have Amazigh, Kurds, Nubians, and black Africans in this area called the "Arab world." It should be the struggle of these people for rights, justice, freedom, and social justice — not limited to one ethnicity or nationality. Nationalism is no longer okay.

DLJ: Did nationalism have a goal? One thinks of the Manifesto line, "Workers of the world, unite!" What about the idea that the Arab Revolution would be part of a global revolution, of decolonization, of the fight against imperialism, beyond Arabs or the people in the region?

YAS: There are two interpretations of Arab nationalism and Third World nationalism at large. One is centered around Third-World solidarity, militant anti-imperialism, and anti-colonialism. This was the weaker of the two trends. The other, more powerful side, monopolized power using this rhetoric: their leaders have amassed power and wealth, and every single one has betrayed the ambitions of their people. Nasser died early; maybe if he lived longer, he would have betrayed his principles, but we can't say for sure. Anwar El-Sadat, who came after him, moved into the